

# Acting at the margins

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## ACTING AT THE MARGINS – ITALIAN MNEMONIC ACTIVISM IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

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**Acting at the margins – Italian mnemonic activism in the European Parliament**

This article contributes to the analysis of the complex dynamics behind the construction of EU memory politics in the European Parliament by focusing on an understudied group of actors: Italian Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). Italian MEPs so far have remained on the margins of most of the main European Parliament initiatives regarding memory politics. The only exception to this rule could be observed during the accession process of Slovenia and Croatia. This article contextualises all instances of mnemonic activism of the Italian MEPs in the period 1999-2019. It investigates the specific narratives put forward by Italian actors and their embedding in the wider European memory framework by studying debate protocols, motions for resolutions, parliamentary questions and minutes of working group meetings in the EP.

**Agir aux marges - Activisme mnémonique au Parlement européen**

Cet article contribue à l'analyse des dynamiques complexes qui animent la construction de politiques mnémoniques au Parlement européen. Pour se faire, cette étude se focalise sur un ensemble d'acteurs qui sont sous-analysés : les députés italiens du Parlement européen. Jusqu'à maintenant, les eurodéputés italiens sont restés à l'écart de la plupart des principales initiatives du Parlement européen sur les politiques de mémoire. La seule exception à la règle a eu lieu pendant les procédures d'accession de la Slovénie et la Croatie. Cet article place dans leur contexte tous les exemples d'activisme mnémonique émanant des eurodéputés italiens dans la période 1999-2019. Cette enquête porte sur les discours spécifiques des acteurs italiens, et sur le lien entre ces discours et le cadre de mémoriel européen. La méthodologie utilisée à cette fin est l'étude des comptes rendus *in extenso* des débats, propositions de résolution, questions parlementaires et procès-verbaux de groupes de travail au Parlement européen.

# Acting at the margins – Italian mnemonic activism in the European Parliament

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## Introduction

**W**hen Silvio Berlusconi – then Prime Minister of Italy – suggested during a speech in the European Parliament (EP) in 2003 that German MEP Martin Schulz should take on the role of ‘kapò’, or Nazi concentration camp supervisor, in an upcoming Italian film, he caused considerable uproar in both the assembly and the media (Corriere della Sera, 2003; The Guardian, 2003a; de Volkskrant, 2003). Across the different political groups, MEPs criticised not only the inappropriate attack on one of their colleagues but also the shameless instrumentalisation of the history of the Second World War for political aims (Oakley, 2003). Only one group stayed surprisingly silent during and after the assembly’s meeting: all reactions by Italian MEPs condemning their Prime Minister’s remarks remained rather limited (The Guardian, 2003b). The ‘kapò incident’, however, is not the only example of notable silence on the part of the Italian EP members when it comes to mobilisation around history and memory issues. If one analyses the number of interventions in the different institutional fora of the EU, it is striking that Italian representatives are not very vocal. Italian politicians’ involvement in both formal and informal working groups dealing with the memory of totalitarian regimes has also been remarkably low. And they have contributed very little to, and were very sceptical of, recent projects like the House of European History (Milošević, field notes based on an interview with Morganti, 20 March 2014).

This is paradoxical; one would expect a heightened interest in issues of war memory among Italians, due to the country’s own experience with Fascism and its very busy commemorative calendar (De Luna, 2015). Identifying itself as belonging to one of the ‘core six’ founders of the European project,

the Italian EP group has furthermore traditionally been very engaged in EP discussions and initiatives. There seems to be only one exception to their pronounced silence in matters of war memory: during the accession process of Slovenia and Croatia, Italian MEPs were highly engaged. Not only did they display a pronounced interest in agreements concerning border issues and the free movement of goods, services, capital and persons, but they also unrolled a number of issues that had caused diplomatic quarrels in the past, and that were all connected to history and memory questions (Geddes and Taylor, 2013). Among them was the issue of the Foibe – natural sinkholes where Yugoslav partisans during the Second World War executed Italian civilians in a retaliation movement for the previous two decades of Italian occupation, suppression and war crimes –, the question of the expulsion of Italians from Istria and Dalmatia (now in Slovenian and Croatian territory) right after the Second World War, and debates on crimes committed by the Communist regime between 1945 and 1948. The Italian MEPs' general silence in European memory debates, and the vehemence with which they suddenly sprang into action when it came to discussing past Italo-Slovene-Croatian relations, raise a number of questions. Why has Italian activism regarding memory politics in the EP remained largely at the margins? Where can we instead observe the activation of certain narratives and contested memories? How does this relate to the European Parliament's attempts at building a transnational view of Europe's experience of war and dictatorship?

In this article we will contextualise what we call the 'mnemonic activism' (see Sierp, 2017; Sierp and Wüstenberg, 2015) of the Italian MEPs. We will investigate the specific narratives that are put forward by Italian actors and analyse their embedding in the wider European memory framework. The aim of the article is to study the emergence and development of narratives from a geographical area that so far has remained understudied. While there is a considerable amount of research on the mobilisation of Central and Eastern European representatives in the different EU institutions (see i.e. Neumayer, 2019; Perchoc, 2015; Littoz-Monnet, 2013), research on southern European political actors in the EP has until now remained scarce. By studying plenary debate protocols, motions for resolutions, parliamentary questions and minutes of working group meetings, this article contributes to the analysis of the complex dynamics behind the construction of EU memory politics in the European Parliament. The analysis is based on data coming from the EU data repository EURLex, the Historical Archives of the European Union (HAEU) in Florence, the Historical Archives of the European Parliament (HAEP) and the European Parliament Research Services (EPRS). 193 documents from the

period 1998-2019 were extracted using a combination of relevant keywords.<sup>1</sup> 113 documents were analysed in depth using frame analysis. We followed Barry Schwartz's (1996) idea of memory as a social frame. Compared to more traditional approaches centred on the notion of political action frame or other frames of memory, Schwartz's framework concentrates on the mechanisms that render the "past a program of the present" (910). By keying one event into another, actors use references to past events for the interpretation of current situations. Incidentally, most mnemonic activity was recorded between 1998-2014, covering the time span between the beginning of accession negotiations with Slovenia and the joining of Croatia. We focused wherever possible on the non-final versions of documents in order to trace the development of memory mobilisations in the EP.

## Memory Activism in the European Parliament

Out of all European institutions, the European Parliament has been the most active in memory politics. Ever since actors in the European Parliament, the Organisation for Cooperation and Security in Europe (OSCE) or the Council of Europe (CoE) started to show interest in the question of memory and identity, politicians in the EP have been at the forefront of debates and disputes on the transnationalisation of memory narratives. While memory and identity politics had been considered for a very long time almost exclusive prerogatives of the nation state, in more recent times one can observe a clear shift away from the national towards both the local and the transnational. The European Parliament, as an arena combining to a certain extent all three levels (the local, the national and the transnational), turned out to be the preferred forum for many MEPs for both claims-making and policy conflict. Previous research has demonstrated that those elements play in many ways an even greater role on the European level than they do on the national one. While Littoz-Monnet (2013) argues that different political actors simply use the arena provided by the European institutions as additional platforms to promote their own memory discourses, Kattago (2009) and Challand (2009) stress the ontological importance of memory cleavages and debates in the European Parliament for making different interpretations of the past public and visible in order to legitimise political action. Closa (2010) similarly focuses

1 Keywords used were: Memory, Second World War, Remembrance, Fascism/fascist, Mussolini, Foibe, Dalmatia/n, Istria/n, Slovenia, Croatia.

on the deliberative element within European debates that allows ‘memory entrepreneurs’ (political parties, formal and informal groups of MEPs, individuals, external actors) from Eastern European countries to make claims for recognition (see also the introduction to this special issue). Taking cues from this already existing research on mnemonic activism, and cross-investigating it with EP declarations and speeches, we can distil two main functions that the EP fulfils for many MEPs: it serves as a forum for a) politics of legitimisation and b) politics of recognition.

## Politics of Legitimation

The European Union was born – not exclusively but to a large extent – as a peace project in response to the experiences of war and dictatorship during the Second World War. Since the Schuman declaration on 9 May 1950, the determination to avoid another war among European nations has been central to the master narrative of the European Union and turned into a sort of ‘founding myth’ (Beattie, 2007; Guisan, 2011). Evoked repeatedly in official documents and political speeches, the memories of intra-European conflict and aggression markedly influenced the set-up of the Union’s institutions. The EP was no exception to this rule. While the early years of European integration had been characterised by an overwhelmingly teleological narrative (Calligaro, 2014), after the end of the Cold War European politicians started to concentrate on the shared experiences of suppression and dictatorship, believing that the collective negative memory of two world wars could hold the European integration project together. Moreover, the commonality of those experiences, and in particular the Holocaust as the culmination of the horrors of the Second World War, started not only to be considered part of a de-nationalised cosmopolitan memory (Levy and Sznajder, 2002) but also turned into the central point of reference for defining the future values and political goals of the European Union. This becomes evident in all main EP resolutions on the Holocaust (European Parliament, 1993; 1995; 2001; 2005b; 2006; 2009). The Holocaust turned into a sort of yardstick with which political developments are measured and evaluated. And it served to defend and legitimise political action, especially in foreign and security policy. For example, during the Balkan crisis and the unsuccessful NATO intervention in Bosnia between 1992 and 1995, military involvement in Kosovo was primarily framed as a moral obligation largely in response to previous European failures to intervene on behalf of innocent civilians. A similar argumentation became

evident during disputes legitimising military interventions in Rwanda, Iraq, Libya, Syria or Afghanistan (Sierp, 2014).

## Politics of Recognition

Closely connected to the politics of legitimation is the second element: politics of recognition. While the EP serves as a discussion arena for – at times – contested political decisions, it also serves as a forum for unresolved disputes about the interpretation of the past. That the same history can lead to very different evaluations of future action became evident from the moment ten Central and Eastern European countries joined the European Union in 2004. As they had experienced the end of the Second World War not as a liberation from dictatorship but rather as the beginning of a new period of repression, the requirement to accept the Western-dominated and EU-endorsed discourse on the memory of the Second World War was perceived as an imposition (Onken, 2007). The EP was the main platform used by politicians from the new member states to put forward an alternative memory narrative, according to which the experiences of human suffering under Nazism and Stalinism are comparable and should as such receive equal recognition. From the moment that representatives of several Central and Eastern European countries proposed to introduce a Day of Remembrance for the victims of Communism in the European remembrance calendar, the differences between the consolidated Western narrative and the Eastern request for recognition of their experiences erupted in open parliamentary debate (Neumayer, 2015). The close analysis of the discussions preceding the introduction of this new European Remembrance Day reveals not only the increasing importance of the EP as a forum for claims-making, but also breaks with the observation made in other contexts that policy conflict in the EP is usually structured along national ('newcomers' versus 'older' member states), geographical (East versus West and North versus South) as well as ideological lines (right-wing versus left-wing political groups). Instead, the debates surrounding the remembrance of European totalitarianisms cut across existing lines of division – a development that appears to be increasingly typical for memory issues on the European level (Sierp, 2017).

As previous research has shown (Kattago, 2009; Littoz-Monnet, 2012; Mälksoo, 2009; Mink and Neumayer, 2013), the politicisation of debates over memory has accelerated after the Union's membership increased from 15 to 25 members in 2004. The accession of Central and Eastern European countries accentuated

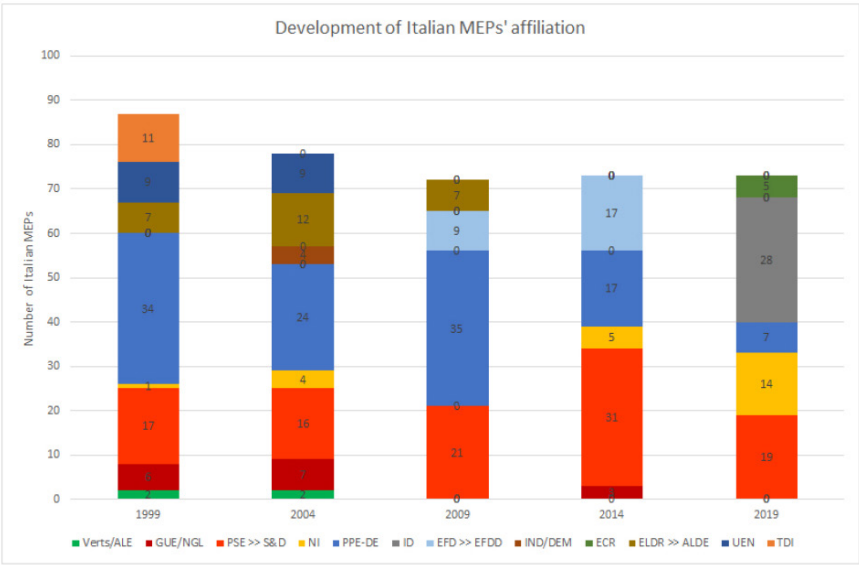


the deliberative battleground by putting the competition for memory claims into the frontlines of parliamentary debate. The pronouncement of soft memory laws increased after Enlargement, as did the amount of mnemonic activism within the European institutions. Especially Central and Eastern European MEPs used the arena provided by the EP to enact politics of legitimization and/or politics of recognition. Taking those two functions of the European Parliament as our starting point, we will investigate the mobilisation around memory of a to date understudied group: Italian MEPs.

## **The Case of Italy**

### **The Role of Italy as a Mnemonic Actor in the EP**

The fact that Italy was one of the founding members of what today is the European Union shaped its self-understanding of being part of the ‘core six’ or ‘core Europe’. On a symbolic level, the prominence of Italian politicians like Altiero Spinelli or Alcide De Gasperi during the early years of European integration markedly contributed to this feeling. Within the European Parliament (whose Brussels building is incidentally named after Altiero Spinelli), the Italian delegation has had between 72 (2009-2014) and 87 (1999-2004) seats. The majority have traditionally been affiliated to the European People’s Party (PPE-DE). This changed only in the 2014-2019 legislature, when Italian MEPs in the Socialist group (S&D, previously PSE) outnumbered those in the PPE-DE. Adherence to other party groups fluctuated together with domestic changes in the Italian party landscape (e.g. the appearance of the Movimento Cinque Stelle in the 2014-2019 legislature, boosting the number of Europe of Freedom and Direct Democracy (EFDD) affiliates to 17). Furthermore, over the years there has been a frequent change of EP party group affiliation across parties. An example is the extreme right-wing party Union for the Europe of the Nations (UEN), whose Italian MEPs belonged to either Alleanza Nazionale (AN) or Lega Nord (LN), and who in 2009 moved, respectively, to PPE-DE and EFDD (at the time EFD, Europe of Freedom and Democracy).



Source: own graph, made with data obtained from the European Parliament's overview of national results in all EP elections: <<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/election-results-2019/en/national-results/italy/1999-2004/constitutive-session/>>. Parties are shown on a left/right spectrum.

As we have seen above, policy conflict in the EP is usually structured along national ('newcomers' versus 'older' member states), geographical (East versus West and North versus South) as well as ideological lines (right-wing versus left-wing political groups in the EP). While research on the mobilisation around the introduction of a Remembrance Day for the victims of European totalitarianisms indicates that the importance of those traditional lines of divisions in the EP diminishes when it comes to memory questions (Neumayer, 2015; Sierp, 2017), the question of which role national party affiliation plays when researching a nationally and geographically homogeneous group (like the Italian MEPs) comes to the forefront. We expect to find that ideological leaning and national party affiliation play a considerable role whenever individuals or groups within the EP pursue two concrete goals: legitimisation for contemporary, often nation-driven interests, and/or recognition and spotlight for specific community-bound experiences. As remembrance claims have become an increasingly frequent occurrence in European institutions, national interests are bound to meet international tensions, as we will see in the following.

## Legitimising Policy Choices

As mentioned above, the European integration project has since the 1990s turned the Holocaust into the main yardstick by which European policies and political attitudes are judged. Politicians from all backgrounds have used its memory to legitimise their positions and actions. Our analysis of Italian activity in the EP demonstrates that Italian MEPs have also appealed to this strategy at points. Their usage of, or appeals to, the past, are nonetheless not limited to the Holocaust. The analysis reveals three main areas in which Italian MEPs have referenced the past in order to legitimise policy choices in the present: a) the experiences of the Second World War more broadly speaking, b) the memory of the founding fathers, and c) the Christian heritage of Europe.

The first category of references to the past to legitimise present political actions follows the trend of the European integration project: the narrative according to which the Second World War and the Holocaust are framed as the ‘founding events’ from which the contemporary EU grew. Traditionally, mnemonic activity in the EP has taken the shape of resolutions and proposals for the remembrance of the Holocaust<sup>2</sup> as the main expression of the societal and human trauma that the EU’s member states are committed to never letting happen again (Littoz-Monnet, 2012). In the case of *Italian* mnemonic activity, the appeals to the remembrance of the Holocaust primarily took place within the context of the debates on the war on Iraq, in early 2003. More specifically, Italian speakers brought up the Holocaust as an argument in their comparisons of American foreign policy in the 1940s and the early 2000s. All of these interventions took place during the two extraordinary debates on the Iraq war on March 20 and 26, 2003, that is, in the week following the invasion of Iraq by American forces, aided by some European independent countries such as the UK and Denmark.

Throughout these debates, four of the Italian speakers mentioned on multiple occasions the duty to remember the American intervention in the Second World War which had liberated both Italy and Europe and had made it possible to put an end to the Holocaust. These speakers were Mario Borghezio (2003a; 2003b), non-aligned in the EP (NI) and member of Lega Nord in the Italian

2 Such as the European Parliament (1993) Resolution on European and International Preservation of the Sites of Nazi Concentration Camps as Historical Memorials, or the 1995 Proposal for a European Holocaust Remembrance Day (Debates of the European Parliament, Sitting on 15 May 1995, Holocaust Remembrance Day and European Parliament).

parliament; Renato Brunetta (2003), member of PPE-DE and Forza Italia; Carlo Fatuzzo (2003), PPE-DE and Italian Pensioners' Party; and Marco Pannella (2003a; 2003b; 2003d), NI and Radicali Italiani. According to these MEPs – all of (extreme) right-wing, conservative or liberal backgrounds<sup>3</sup> –, the memory of how Europe had depended on, and benefited from, American foreign intervention in the 1940s legitimised the American decision to act in Iraq in the present. By referring to the EU's founding events and traumas, they thus explicitly aligned the liberation of Europe, and Italy in particular, from fascism in the 1940s, with the liberation of Iraq from Hussein's dictatorship in the 2000s.

Out of the six Italian speakers who used the Second World War and the Holocaust as a framing device during the Iraq debates, the two remaining MEPs did so with the opposite intention: they wanted to denounce the American intervention as a violation of the EU *raison d'être* derived from the Holocaust. These two speakers were Renzo Imbeni (2003) and Luisa Morgantini (2003), who belonged, respectively, to the PSE and the European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL) in the EP, and Democratici di Sinistra and Partito della Rifondazione Comunista in the national sphere. In their view, the lessons learnt from the trauma of the Second World War, and the political commitments to which it had led in Europe, had been ignored and violated by the American intervention in Iraq.

These examples of searching for political legitimization by appealing to the EU founding narrative demonstrate how malleable memory claims can be at institutional levels. The same events, and their derived trauma and learnt lessons, can be simultaneously used for opposite political goals depending on the framing of both the memories and the issue at hand. In this case, the value of the American intervention in Europe in the 1940s is ascribed by the contemporary context and the political orientation of the speaker. It thus comes as no surprise that arguments using the memory of past wars in favour of military intervention can be attributed mainly to speakers from the centre-right, while all interventions arguing against came from left-wing MEPs. This is in line with findings on political communication on foreign policy issues in general and the Iraq war in particular (see Schuster and Maier, 2006; Mello, 2012). It also corresponds to how the issue was debated on the national level in Italy (Focardi, 2005, 109).

3 Pannella stands out from this group as the leader of the Italian radical party, often considered left-libertarian. In 1994 he was temporarily part of the first Berlusconi government.

A second category of references to the past where Italian MEPs' activity stands out is with respect to the EU's founding figures. Italy's position as one of the core six countries involved in the European project from the very beginning seems to have lent many Italian MEPs a sense of historic righteousness, that is, a feeling that Italy's decades-long national involvement in the EU justified and supported certain contemporary ideological positions or policy choices. In this regard, the fact that some of the most prominent 'fathers of the European project', such as Altiero Spinelli or Alcide De Gasperi, were Italian, has allowed MEPs to use their names as a resource that adds weight to arguments expressed in the assembly. For example, Spinelli's original ideas were frequently referred to during the debates on the Constitutional Treaty in 2004 and 2005 by the Italian speakers. The Italian MEPs that purposefully used the names of Spinelli or De Gasperi to defend their position were all of socialist or liberal tradition: Alessandro Battilocchio (2005), NI in the EP and member of the New Italian Socialist Party; Giorgio Napolitano (2004), member of the Party of European Socialists (PSE) and Democratici di Sinistra; Marco Pannella (2004), NI and Radicali Italiani; and Mario Segni (2004), Union for Europe of the Nations (UEN) and Patto dei Liberaldemocratici. For them, the spirit behind their countrymen's efforts in the 1950s was being smeared by the EP's refusal to push forward a Constitutional Treaty that would finally "fulfil the federalist hopes of the founding fathers" (Pannella, 2004). During the same legislature (1999-2004), a similar argument was also used to defend the American military intervention in Iraq. According to MEP Marco Pannella (2003a; 2003c), the Americans' action was consistent with the righteous stance of the founding fathers, including Spinelli, in their fight against fascism. The EP's inactivity, on the other hand, was reminiscent of a "cowardly Europe, a Vichy's Europe", paralysed by – as MEP Mario Borghezio (2003), at the time NI in the EP and Lega Nord in Italy, puts it – "narrow-minded pacifists".

A third, final dimension of using the past to legitimise contemporary choices in which Italian MEPs have had a leading voice in the EP is with regards to the Christian heritage of Europe. References appeared particularly in the context of negotiations preceding the Central and Eastern European enlargement. The perceived institutional failure to officially acknowledge Europe's Christian roots was lamented together with the increasing religious diversity within Europe. On ten distinct occasions, all during the Fifth parliamentary term, the issue of Christian heritage being ignored by the EU institutions was brought to the fore of parliamentary discussions. Often, references came accompanied by political (and moral) statements. For example, support for the Iraq war was described as "a Christian [...] task [...] to fight together for free Italians,

free Germans or free Iraqis, instead of sacrificing everything to the moloch of peace” (Pannella, 2003b). In other cases, references to Europe’s heritage are an objective in itself. Italian MEPs – all from conservative parties, who have the values of Christianity inscribed in their national party programme – felt the Christian origin of Europe to be an important aspect of European identity (Berlusconi, 2003; Mauro, 2003; Muscardini, 2003; Speroni, 2000; Tajani, 2003). Italian MEPs also believed Europe’s Christian heritage should be explicitly mentioned in the text of the Constitutional Treaty, if there was to be one. This is the case of Francesco Fiori (2003a; 2003b), PPE-DE/Forza Italia; Cristiana Muscardini (2003), UEN/Alleanza Nazionale (AN); Antonio Tajani (2004), PPE-DE/Forza Italia. Although the amount of those claims diminished over time, they never went away fully: in 2009, Roberto Fiore (NI/Forza Nuova), for example, likened a series of declarations by the then-chiefs of government Zapatero, Merkel and Sarkozy to an “emerging totalitarianism [...] quite radical when it comes to intervening to attack the Catholic Church”.

The analysis of Italian discourses on the three elements explained above (EU founding figures, founding events and Christian heritage) demonstrates that Italian MEPs are far from reluctant to use mnemonic devices in their EP interventions. Their arguments using historical narratives as their basis are – if perhaps not overwhelming in numbers – explicit and blunt, with direct references to totalitarianism, the Holocaust or the shame of ‘Vichy’s Europe’ as weighted claims. Their use of the EU’s founding fathers and events corroborates Littoz-Monnet’s (2013) argument that the European fora (in this case the European Parliament) have become an additional platform for national politicians to push forward their own political discourse. Debates on the European (and thus also Italian) intervention in Iraq, for example, which was a nation-driven issue, acquired a new urgency and legitimation at the supranational level by bringing in the EU founding fathers and what ‘they would have done’. The use of these rhetorical devices is clearly determined by (national) party affiliations; Altiero Spinelli is mostly brought up by liberals and social democrats who see themselves as standing in the tradition of Spinelli’s ideas, whereas all the references to Christianity come from conservative parties. Their shared strategy to highlight ‘Europeanness’ in European institutions, furthermore, allows for concrete “illumination and renegotiation of the public past”, as Kattago (2009) and Challand (2009) note. By putting forward a reinterpretation of what the end of the Second World War meant to Italy, and of the role ascribed to the Allies who freed Italians from fascism, Italian MEPs continue to highlight their core role in the traumatic event that gave way to the European project. In doing so, they at the same time confirm that the Second

World War and the Holocaust remain the central points of reference for the values and goals guiding future European political action.

## Recognising Italian Trauma

As we have seen above, the Italian experience of the Second World War is frequently referred to by Italian MEPs during policy debates (e.g. Borghezio, 2003a; 2003b; Brunetta, 2003; Fatuzzo, 2003; Pannella, 2003a; 2003b; 2003d). While most comments fall within the EU-endorsed narrative about the Second World War, are not particularly contested and thus do not receive special attention by other representatives, references to one particular dimension of this experience caused considerable diplomatic quarrels every time it was mentioned: the Foibe massacres. These mass killings, during which an undefined number of Italians were killed or disappeared by Yugoslav partisans, took place in Istria, Dalmatia and Venezia Giulia as a retaliation move between 1943 and 1945. These events were the peak of Italo-Yugoslav ethnic conflict after three decades of Italian invasion and forced Italianisation by Italian Fascists, beginning in the midst of the Second World War and shortly after the Italian change of alliance. In the years following the massacres, approximately 300.000 Italians were exiled from Istria and Dalmatia, then part of the Yugoslav state (on the development of the multiple Foibe conflicts, see Baracetti, 2009; Bernardi, 2019).

Ever since, the Foibe killings have remained historiographically and popularly contentious (Ballinger, 2003). As Baracetti (2009) explains, despite the advancement of research that provides a nuanced view of the events and their complex history, the more extreme interpretations (with either the Italians or the Yugoslavs being completely redeemed by the motivation behind their actions) remain strongly consolidated in the political and media spheres. In Italy, particularly, the framing of the Foibe has become an ideological dog-whistle for the far-Right, and its remembrance has been a frequent point of contention both within national politics (Cossu, 2010; Ballinger, 2003; Bernardi, 2019) and international relations with Slovenia and Croatia (Baracetti, 2009).

As a forum for supra- and international European politics, the EP has also seen much interest in the Foibe, always and exclusively from the Italian side. The systematic analysis of Italian MEPs' interventions shows that the topic of the Foibe became politically relevant just before and during the Eastern enlargement, when accession negotiations started – among others – first



with Slovenia and then Croatia. The Fifth and Sixth European parliamentary terms (1999-2009) were characterised by tense interventions stemming from Italian demands to make the memory of the Foibe a key factor in the accession negotiations. These claims never made it formally into the accession documents, or even into any other resolutions or EP proposals. The only formal attempt was the proposal to include the Foibe as a ‘genocide’, alongside the Armenian one, in a 2005 motion for an EP resolution on anti-Semitism and racism (European Parliament, 2005a). This motion was put forward by two Italian MEPs – Romano Maria La Russa and Roberta Angelilli, both members of Alleanza Nazionale (UEN in the EP), the party that had also brought the Foibe into domestic Italian political discourse (Cossu, 2009; 2010) –, as well as a Latvian MEP, Inese Vaidere, and Irish MEP Brian Crowley, both members of UEN. The motion did not pass the assembly. Nonetheless, despite the lack of supranational institutional resonance, Italian MEPs continued to bring up the memory of the Foibe until the final stages of the accession negotiations with Croatia in 2011 (i.e. La Russa, 2005; Borghezio, 2004; Buttiglione, 2000; Tajani, 2000; Angelilli, 2006; 2011a; 2011b). Only then, once all agreements with Croatia had been signed, and with Slovenia having joined the EU seven years back, did Italian MEPs stop making Foibe-related claims in the EP. During the active time frame, Italian MEPs emphasised particularly two elements: a) the inherent historic importance of the killings, and b) its contemporary political relevance for the protection of Italian minorities in Slovenia and Croatia.

Arguments for the historic importance of the Foibe massacres vary, but most of them stress that the events in Istria, Dalmatia and Venezia Giulia belong to Europe’s unresolved and unremembered tragedies. The strongest Italian discourse comes from the extreme right, using the term ‘Holocaust’ when describing the Foibe massacres. The claim that it was a form of ‘olocausto italiano’ (Italian Holocaust) first appeared on the national level (Knittel, 2014) and was then transposed to the European one. Examples are the interventions by Romano Maria La Russa (2005), member of UEN and AN, who called the Foibe “one of the multiple other [holocausts] which are perhaps less well known but certainly no less serious”; or the words of Mario Borghezio (2004), NI/Lega Nord, who called “to mind the tragedies of totalitarianism of the last century”. In a similar fashion, multiple other Italian MEPs from the Centre-right, such as Rocco Buttiglione (2000), PPE-DE/Unione di Centro; Antonio Tajani (2000); or Roberta Angelilli (2006; 2011a; 2011b), UEN/PPE/AN, called it a ‘series of crimes against humanity’ that had preceded the ethnic cleansing later seen in the Balkans. The Foibe perpetrators were thus on the one hand aligned with the Nazis and their systematic killing machine, and



on the other with the ancient stereotype of the barbarian ‘Slav’ that practices uncivilized massacres.

All statements, strengthened by the terminology used and the direct comparison made with both the Holocaust and the more recent Yugoslavian wars, were used to ask for official recognition of the tragedy by the European institutions. This recognition should be tripartite: the Slovenian and Croatian states are requested to recognise the role Yugoslav partisans played as perpetrators who have never admitted their fault, while the rest of Europe acted as bystanders who have largely ignored the events at both the cultural and the institutional levels. Given that all interventions were made by exponents of parties that at the time were in a coalition with Berlusconi’s Forza Italia, together with Alleanza Nazionale, it is not too surprising that the tone and argumentation of the centre-right MEPs are similar to the ones of the extreme Right quoted earlier. By using European memory markers (‘crimes against humanity’, ‘holocaust’), national politics are thus projected onto the transnational level.

For Italian MEPs, the Italian minority in Istria and Dalmatia continues to be historically castigated and claims for their protection therefore often appear in the context of resolutions and interventions on the general protection of minorities. For the Italian speakers, the main worries during debates on the Slovenian and Croatian accession were the right to bilingualism, the right to ownership of property, and economic compensation for hardship endured. The bilingual question, numerically least important in terms of amount of interventions (e.g. Gawronski, 2001; Podestà, 2001; both members of PPE-DE/Forza Italia), was brought to the attention of both the EP and the European Commission after it was known that the national Croatian government was not willing to recognise the Italian language in the Croatian constitution. The second concern, property rights, was linked to the apparent discrimination in Croatia against Italian nationals that attempt to access the property market. Especially MEPs from extreme-right wing parties pointed out this issue. They were Cristiana Muscardini (2005b; 2006b), UEN/AN; Guido Podestà (2005), PPE-DE/Forza Italia; Roberta Angelilli (2006), UEN/AN; Mario Borghezio (2006), NI/Lega Nord; and Luca Romagnoli (2009a), NI/Movimento Sociale Fiamma tricolore. They stressed that this discriminatory act had been largely ignored by the same European institutions who would be outraged by its blatant violation of *acquis communautaire* if it had taken place in a different context.

It was not just discrimination in accessing the property market that continued to be a topic of concern; so was the restitution of confiscated property. The

latter was explicitly and repeatedly demanded over a span of five years, even shortly after Croatia had finalised their accession negotiations in mid-2011 (Angelilli, 2006; 2011a; 2011b; Borghezio, 2006; 2009; 2011; Muscardini, 2006b; Romagnoli, 2009a; 2009b). MEPs highlighted the economic and personal loss that the Italian minority had suffered during and after the Second World War as consequence of both the killings and the exile, and asked for moral and monetary compensation. Others, coming mainly from centre-right parties, such as Sergio Silvestris (2011), PPE/Il Popolo della Libertà; Giovanni Collino (2011), PPE/AN; or Giovanni La Via (2011), PPE/Il Popolo della Libertà, acknowledged the progress of Croatian institutions in this domain but asked for further transparency and accountability when it came to property restitution. It is striking that most of the discourses on restitution issues only appear during the accession negotiations with Croatia. During debates on Slovenia, the compensation of Italian victims played a role but lacked specific claims (e.g. Muscardini, 2001). Underlying all of the interventions – regardless of the political origin of their speakers – is the concern with the memory of the Foibe massacre as a tragedy whose consequences are still being felt in the Italian society (e.g. Angelilli, 2006; Serracchiani, 2010, S&D/Partito Democratico).

Furthermore, Italian MEPs made it clear that not only the Slovenian or Croatian governments are to blame, but also the European institutions that have chosen not to give the Foibe the importance and focus of remembrance that it deserves. The most aggressive and explicit claims were made by representatives of the extreme Right, who lamented that “the European Union ha[d not] been at all interested in [n]or ha[d] protected the rights of the Italian minority or those of the Giulian-Dalmatian exiles” (Muscardini, 2006a). They argued that the EU seemed to hide behind the apparently bilateral nature of the issue, despite the fact that the affected community was after all a minority, and thus entitled to the special protection that the EU offers minorities in general. Other MEPs, although in less bold terms, also pointed out that this ‘bilateral problem’ was large enough to impede a smooth continuation of the accession negotiations (Romagnoli, 2009; Collino, 2010; Angelilli, 2011). They claimed that the EU must check that all aspects of the *acquis communautaire* were being respected, and that they could not support Croatian accession until they saw this enforcement by the EU.<sup>4</sup> This issue was brought to the EP’s attention no fewer than

4 This line of argument is not unique to the Croatian accession. Similar discussions took place during the accession of the Czech Republic with right-wing parties in Germany, Austria and Hungary calling for the controversial Benes decrees – legitimising the loss of citizenship and property of the German and Hungarian minorities in Czechoslovakia – to be annulled before the Czech Republic could join the EU (Nagengast, 2003).

fourteen times throughout the negotiation period with both countries, usually during debates, in reaction to the progress reports that the EP rapporteurs presented on the upcoming enlargements, or as parliamentary questions (Gawronski, 2001; Muscardini, 2001; 2005b; Podestà, 2001; 2005; Angelilli, 2006; Borghezio, 2006; 2011; Panzeri, 2007; Romagnoli, 2009a; 2009b; Collino, 2010; Serracchiani, 2010).

In other words, the claim for the institutional recognition of the tragedy that the Italian minority had endured had become a political bargaining tool, whose systematic presence in negotiations worked as a reminder of the power that Italy has in international decision-making. The seeming absence of the Left in those debates should not be confused with a general disengagement with memory issues. On the contrary, on the national level, left-wing politicians were heavily involved in support of President Ciampi's attempts to rewrite the memory of the Resistance – a theme not addressed at all on the supranational level (Focardi, 2013, 51-90). Nonetheless, by the second half of the 2000s, Ciampi's initiatives had slowly lost support and visibility in the political arena, and the Right – under the leadership of Berlusconi – solidified their claims and contributed to a revisionist attitude in Italian politics (Mattioli, 2011). It is this discursive dominance from the Right that we can observe in the EP during the Slovenian and Croatian accessions.

The analysis demonstrates that Italian MEPs utilised the European institutions, and the EP in particular, as a deliberative forum in which to bring their bilateral disputes with Slovenia and Croatia. One of the most striking examples of this was the diplomatic crisis that erupted in 2007 after Giorgio Napolitano called the Foibe massacre 'ethnic cleansing' (Vallerin, 2018, 14). After a sharp exchange of words on both sides, several Italian MEPs from UEN asked the Commission to officially condemn the reaction by Croat President Mesić as denial (Muscardini, 2007; Musumeci, 2007). (The Commission answered that it had no competences to act as mediator in those bilateral disputes.) By emphasising the European dimension of the Foibe and making reference to other historical tragedies (i.e. calling it the 'Italian holocaust' or the 'precursor of the Balkan ethnic cleansings'), Italian MEPS furthermore aimed at political recognition for the Italian-speaking minorities in Istria and Dalmatia and the de-legitimisation of Slovenia and Croatia as 'proper' EU members. Until the arrival of Slovenia and Croatia to the EU circle, the Italian memory of the Foibe may have been largely secondary to the European memory framework, but there was also hardly any opposition to it. Slovenian and Croatian institutional and cultural memories, on the other hand, may

very well have presented a competing narrative at the European level, potentially even their own claim of an equivalent ‘holocaust’ carried out by Italian Fascists (Ballinger, 2003, 129). This would have put into question the idea that Italian Fascism was harmless and essentially an innocent version of German National Socialism. Thus Italian MEPs acted quickly and bluntly in their quest for European recognition of the Italian experiences in order to avoid any kind of discussion about Italian war crimes.

This competition between Italian and Slovenian-Croatian memories has taken on a dimension of bargaining power. The position of Italy as one of the historic founders of the European project has allowed them to (attempt to) influence the negotiation talks between the EU and Slovenia and Croatia, respectively, using memory as a bargaining tool by emphasising the faults of the latter and the duties of the former. These direct appeals to the EP were limited in time; once Slovenia and Croatia had joined the European Union, the Italian bargaining position lost power and the claims for concrete political action decreased in number until they eventually disappeared, in 2011, following the successful conclusion of Croatia’s accession agreements.

## The Origins of Claims-Making

As we have seen above, research on the mobilisation of Central and Eastern European representatives demonstrated that debates in the EP are no longer necessarily structured along national, geographical or ideological lines. When investigating the data on the Italian interventions focused on memory, it becomes evident that this might not be true for claims coming from a geographically and nationally homogeneous group. Indeed, our research suggests that in this case we are dealing with a clear ideological divide determined more by national party affiliation than by European party group adherence. Amongst the 113 EP documents scrutinised, we found 75 references to the events and remembrance of the (post-) Second World War with an explicit connection to contemporary policies. Out of these 75 spoken occasions, 58 (77%) came from extreme-right, right or centre-right parties (in decreasing numerical importance, PPE-DE, NI (associated to right-wing Italian parties), UEN, IND/DEM and TDI). Within these 75 interventions, we coded for the ones focused on the bilateral issues with Slovenia or Croatia. The result was 30 speeches, 26 (87%) of which came from the aforementioned extreme right-wing and centre-right parties. As we have seen above, the tone of these interventions was generally aggressive, centred on the need for restitution and institutional

recognition of the Italian trauma. On the other hand, the left-wing Italian MEPs, in addition to their numerically lower engagement with the topic (i.e. only 4 direct allusions to the Foibe), were markedly more moderate in tone, always highlighting the many efforts that Slovenia and Croatia were making to accommodate the European (including Italian) demands (see, for example, Panzeri, 2007; Serracchiani, 2010). The following table breaks down the interventions per party.

Memory-Related Interventions		Istria/Dalmatia-Related Interventions	
<b>PPE-DE</b>	26	<b>PPE-DE</b>	12
<b>UEN</b>	11	<b>UEN</b>	6
<b>PSE</b>	8	<b>PSE</b>	3
<b>GUE/NGL</b>	7	<b>GUE/NGL</b>	0
<b>S&amp;D</b>	2	<b>S&amp;D</b>	1
<b>NI</b>	18	<b>NI</b>	7
<b>IND/DEM</b>	2	<b>IND/DEM</b>	1
<b>TDI</b>	1	<b>TDI</b>	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>

This suggests that claims-making in the context of memory issues seems to fall into the domain of the right-wing parties. Of course, the composition of the EP needs to be taken into account when analysing the data. The largest group of Italian MEPs in the EP during the time period under investigation was part of the PPE-DE party group and thus also received more speaking time than other groups. If one considers that the European Parliament is often used by MEPs to foreground national debates in order to seek recognition or legitimisation, this result is thus not too surprising, since the Italian domestic debate on the contested history of the killings in the Foibe and the expulsion of the Italian minority in Istria and Dalmatia has been largely dominated by the Right, both centre-right and extreme-right (Mattioli, 2011).

In the 1990s and 2000s, this debate took a markedly revisionist tone, which sought to undermine the established societal and international agreement consolidated in the 1975 Treaty of Osimo (Mattioli, 2011). This Treaty, signed by Italy and Yugoslavia, cemented the partition of the region, proposed economic cooperation and indemnities for exiles, as well as protection for Slovene and Italian minorities (Ballinger, 2003, 93). It was Gianfranco Fini (Alleanza Nazionale), at the time Foreign Minister in the Berlusconi government, who proposed to revise the ‘confine orientale’ putting into question the Treaty of Osimo. Indeed, Mirko Tremaglia, President of the Foreign Affairs Commission of the Camera dei Deputati and also member of Alleanza Nazionale, sustained

openly that Italy was under no obligation any more to respect the treaty since it had been signed with a state that had ceased to exist (Mattioli, 2011, 52). Seen in this context, the activism of the Italian MEPs seems to be very much dictated by foreign policy considerations. By moving part of the national discussions into the European arena, right-wing politicians are expanding their room for manoeuvre and trying to score additional points at home. That this strategy could potentially backfire if Slovenes and Croats asked in turn for an investigation into Italian war crimes seems not to bother those politicians, and indicates the perceived weakness of the European Parliament.

Another example of the Right's engagement in the debate is the introduction, in 2004, of a new Memorial Day in honour of the *Martiri delle Foibe* – the victims of the killings perpetrated mainly by Yugoslav partisans that took place in Istria during and shortly after the Second World War. The introduction of this new commemorative day was arguably only possible while Silvio Berlusconi's centre-right coalition was in government. In fact, the idea to create a specific day commemorating the Foibe was markedly pushed by Alleanza Nazionale, the extreme right party in Berlusconi's coalition. Choosing February 10th, the date on which the peace-treaty that sanctioned Italy's loss of her eastern territories was signed in 1947, was certainly no coincidence, and it explicitly connected the Foibe massacres to the expulsion of more than 300.000 Italians from the territories that are today in Slovenia and Croatia. The analysis of the domestic debates shows that there was no opposition from the centre-left forces to the bill proposing the creation of a Memorial Day. According to Andrea Cossu (2010, 14), the introduction of the new Memorial Day was endured rather than accepted by the Left, whereas the Right asserted its symbolic ownership over the way it should be celebrated.

Overall, since 2010, the debate has solidified into two different memory cultures with regards to the Foibe: one with a strong ultranationalist slant promoted by the Right, and one focused on reconciliation between the Balkan states and Italy, advocated for by Giorgio Napolitano and the Left (Vallerin, 2018).<sup>5</sup> The debates in the EP seem to have followed a very similar pattern, with the debates being structured along the same lines of arguments that could be observed in the national context. Indeed, the close analysis of the origin of the claims put forward reveals that Italian MEPs in many instances simply uploaded

5 One needs to mention that Giorgio Napolitano three years earlier had caused a diplomatic crisis when he called the Foibe the result of "a Slavic annexationist move that prevailed above all in the 1947 Peace Treaty and which took on the sinister contours of ethnic cleansing" (Napolitano, 2007).

their national discourse to the European level. The fact that they often did not necessarily follow the line of their respective European party group but rather the logic of coalition-building in the national sphere (vividly seen during Berlusconi's term in office, whose centre-right coalition comprised exponents of the extreme Right), proves the importance national party affiliation can play in certain circumstances.

## Conclusion

Since the 1990s, European institutions have promoted the Second World War and the Holocaust as a traumatic lesson that Europe learnt and can now 'teach' to other countries (Littoz-Monnet, 2012). Italian MEPs from all ideological backgrounds thus use the existing EU discourse on the Second World War and the Holocaust in order to legitimise policy choices. Paradoxically, the discourse on the uniqueness of the Holocaust is complemented by the demand of some Italian MEPs to treat the Foibe as a 'minor holocaust'. This claim 'overlaps' to a certain extent with the Eastern European efforts to raise other (Stalinist) crimes to the same level of importance and trauma as the Nazi Holocaust. Some Italian interventions explicitly supported this comparative framework between Stalinism and Nazism (e.g. Borghezio, 2009b). This suggests that Eastern European MEPs have succeeded in putting their framework centre-piece encouraging other countries' MEPs to put forward their own memory narrative, thus adding another piece to the grand mosaic of the ever-changing European memory framework (see introduction by the two guest editors).

Moreover, through their consolidation of the Istrian and Dalmatian minorities as communities that require supranational protection from the states in which they live, Italian MEPs have cemented and favoured the agenda-setting dynamics between regions and EU institutions. In particular, they have given voice to the regionalist drive of Giulian-Dalmatian associations, whose parameters for remembrance marked from 2003 onwards the official Italian commemoration of the Foibe on February 10th. They thus favoured the regional embracing of the EU for regionalist or nationalist purposes (Keating and Hooghe, 2006, 272).

The choice of the EP as a forum for the remembrance of the Foibe and the Italian exodus after the national context had been exhausted confirms the tendency of many MEPs towards "venue-shopping strategies" (Littoz-Monnet, 2013,



502). By bringing the issue of remembrance and compensation into multiple political venues, both at national and supranational levels, Italian politicians – overwhelmingly from the Right – increased their visibility and reached out to a larger crowd of potential supporters who could, hypothetically, legitimise their claims. By doing so, they asserted ownership over the EU framework by uploading their own memories of the past into the European policy discourse. Whether these parliamentary interventions successfully gathered external (non-Italian) support is a different matter. Our research indicates that none of the Foibe-related claims made during the accession negotiations with Slovenia and Croatia were particularly well received by the other EU members. While the blunt seeking of validation, acknowledgement and recognition of specific national historical experiences is often challenged by (trans)national political actors, in the Italian case silence predominated. All the Italian demands were neither rebuked nor accepted. Some of the most vocal Italian MEPs even elevated complaints about how a) the other countries' MEPs did not take their interventions in the EP seriously (Podestà, 2005), and b) the Italian minorities that they were attempting to protect had been abandoned by EU institutions in general (Muscardini, 2006a).

The fact that the European institutions remained unresponsive to the claims of the Italian Right, despite having adopted the antitotalitarian paradigm also promoted by the Central and Eastern European countries, can only be explained by the obvious one-sidedness of the Italian claims, who deliberately disregarded the wider historical context (see also Vallerin, 2018). In none of the references to the Foibe the antecedent of the massacres was mentioned, namely the brutal occupation and war crimes committed by Italian fascists in former Yugoslavia in the 20 years preceding the massacres. It is very likely that actors in the EU institutions tried to avoid any kind of public discussion that would jeopardize the accession of, and future relationship with, the former Yugoslav states. They thus preferred to entrust the discussion to the respective national governments, to whom they ascribed “buone relazioni di vicinato” (good neighbourly relations) (Füle, 2012). Nonetheless, and as demonstrated by the words of EP President Tajani, who during a commemorative service in 2019 shouted “Long live Trieste, long live Italian Istria, long live Italian Dalmatia, long live Italian exiles” (Barigazzi, 2019), the Italian efforts to include Istria and Dalmatia in a collective European memory have not died out.<sup>6</sup> They will most likely continue to fuel bilateral tensions with Slovenia and Croatia also

6 Interestingly, Tajani was the only Italian MEP who signed the EP resolution of 19 September 2019 on the importance of European remembrance for the future of Europe.



in the future, despite a mutual interest in reconciliation, as evidenced by the joint commemoration of the Presidents of Italy and Slovenia, Mattarella and Pahor, of the victims of the Foibe on 13 July 2020 (Vecchio, 2020).

Our research shows that Italian MEPs might have remained on the margins of most of the main European Parliament initiatives regarding memory politics. However, whenever they did get involved, they used memory as a bargaining tool to push forward specific national interests. Their rhetorical strategies followed the ideological lines usually present in the national sphere (e.g. left-wing parties against military intervention, Christian democrats pushing for an institutional recognition of Europe's Christian roots, etc.), and they “uploaded” burning issues from the Italian arena into the European one, such as the memory of the Foibe. These findings demonstrate that the analysis of mnemonic activity in European fora requires the nuance provided by the national context, as well as ideological and geographical considerations, if we are to understand why and how European political actors use the mnemonic tools at their disposal.

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